

## Risk-Seeking Behavior by Dwarfankylosaur

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**Summary:**

"...but I can't say 'you're controlling and smothering and I need to never see you again if I'm ever going to grow a spine,'" Eddie said, avoiding Richie's eyes. "So I just skipped ahead to the part where I told her I was gay."

Richie, who had been using one large and one small french fry to stage a dramatic reenactment of the dissolution of Eddie's marriage, froze.

## 1. Chapter 1

After Eddie spent a week in the hospital unconscious, and another three days awake and watching the hole in his chest slowly close up with a mixture of fascination and horror, the staff was forced to admit that he was well enough to be discharged, even if no one could explain how or why that had happened.

He was tempted to stay longer, but if he did that he was going to lose his nerve. He let the four of his friends who had stuck around take him out to breakfast, and then let Ben and Bev escort him to airport security and wave wildly as he went through, like proud parents whose kid was taking his first solo flight to see Grandma. Then he called Myra to tell her he would be on a flight tomorrow, because if he told her the truth she would meet him at the airport, and letting her load his suitcases into her car felt like a decision he couldn't walk back.

It wasn't a big deal. He could do this. He and Myra were toxic in ways he couldn't even have conceived of three weeks ago, and Myra wasn't an unreasonable person, so logically there was some combination of words that would make her understand that and agree that they should break up. He just had to find that combination.

She would have to agree, wouldn't she? He could have talked to his friends about this first, but he couldn't shake the fear that they would ask him a lot of gentle, leading questions, or, in Bev's case, straight-up tell him that everything was fine and he was having a mid-life crisis. Was this how Greg Oslacovic in finance felt, right before he left his wife because of a 'profound, spiritual connection' he had formed with a 24-year-old bartender?

Of course, he and Myra had real, important problems that had nothing to do with the fact that Eddie suddenly had an actual libido for the first time in twenty-odd years. But then, Greg had also insisted that his marriage had real, important problems, even if those problems had never seemed all that important before what's-her-name and her tongue ring. Eddie had listened to Greg with a mixture of embarrassment and pity but no sympathy whatsoever. He hadn't

known then, or hadn't remembered, how it felt to want someone so badly it made you reckless and stupid.

Christ, at least Greg had probably gotten laid a few times before he lost everything in the divorce and the bartender left him for his ex-wife. There was no chance of that happening for him, so maybe Greg was the success story.

Amazingly, despite everything, he slept on the flight to LaGuardia; more amazingly, he didn't have any nightmares. Instead, he dreamt he was cocooned in a warm, dark space, listening to an audibly weeping Richie Tozier recite what sounded like passages from *Fifty Shades of Gray*. The subtext was heavy-handed and enjoying Richie's sobbing was probably a little mean, but Eddie liked the dream anyway. Richie had been gratifyingly distraught when Eddie was skewered, and it was no surprise his subconscious chose to focus on that instead of the fact that Richie had fucked off to LA the second Eddie woke up.

He felt calmer as he got off the plane, and decided the dream was a good sign. He was Eddie Kaspbrak. He had faced (and stabbed) his childhood bully. He had helped kill the physical manifestation of the concept of fear. He had taken a giant claw to the chest and survived. He was prepared. He could do this.

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He was not prepared, and he could not do this, and Myra had neatly taken apart all of his careful explanations as though they were puzzle toys he had thoughtfully brought her from the airport gift shop. But somehow, four hours later, here he was in a parking lot six blocks from his house, with his passport and a thumb drive with last ten years of his tax returns on it safely on the passenger seat next to him. His cell phone rang, but it was a number he didn't recognize — thank God — so he ignored it. It was starting to rain. Shit, where was he going to go? He had friends in the city who would put him up for a night, but that wasn't what he needed; he'd already planned to go back to the airport Best Western if Myra didn't want him sleeping in the guest room. What he needed was someone who would physically stop him from answering his phone when Myra called, and he didn't have friends like that.

Then he realized that, shit, he did have friends like that, friends whose landline numbers he might not recognize, but by then the call had gone to voicemail. He stared at the missed call notification in panic for a second, then remembered, *hey, dumbass, your phone has a redial button*, and pressed it.

The phone rang for a worrying amount of time before connecting. “Hey, man,” said the slightly breathy voice of Richie Tozier. “I’m in town for a work thing, and I was hoping we could catch up? I’ll be here a few days, so any time that works for you is good.”

“I just left my wife,” Eddie said.

“Um.” Richie sounded thrown. That was fair. Eddie was also extremely thrown. “Congratulations? No, really, congratulations, that’s great. Where have you been staying? We should celebrate.”

“No, I mean I *just* left my wife. Like twenty minutes ago I left my wife. And now I’m having some kind of breakdown in an Applebee’s parking lot.”

“Okay, fuck,” Richie said, “which Applebee’s?”

“It’s an hour outside the city, I guarantee it’s nowhere near you. And I’m really not up to taking the train tonight. Listen, I’m sorry to dump this on you. Let’s meet up tomorrow when I have some kind of filter again.” He wouldn’t have thought twice about asking Bill or Ben to fly across the country, but asking Richie to take the commuter rail to North Hempstead suddenly seemed like way too much. Richie had left Derry before he woke up, and Richie hadn’t contacted him in the week and a half since. He remembered that the couple’s therapist he and Myra had seen for a while had talked a lot about setting boundaries, and respecting boundaries others had set.

“Eddie,” Richie said. “Which fucking Applebee’s?”

Eddie told him.

After Richie hung up, promising to be there in a timespan Eddie knew to be physically impossible, a voicemail notification popped up. Eddie tapped it.

"Hey, man," said the voice of Richie Tozier, sounding — oddly rehearsed, actually. "I'm in town for a work thing, and I thought maybe we could get together and catch up. I— wait, fuck, shit—" There was a fumbling sound, as though Richie had dropped the phone, and then a few beeping noises, as though he were hitting random buttons, before the message cut off. Eddie hit play again.

"Hey, man," said the voice of Richie Tozier, sounding definitely, extremely rehearsed now that Eddie was listening for it. And wasn't that how he'd started their phone conversation, too?

Everyone had told him that Richie had stuck to his side like a lamprey the whole time he'd been unconscious, and that he'd only left because he had something unspecified but very important to take care of back in LA. Until this moment, Eddie had been a hundred percent certain they were only saying that because of how pathetic he'd looked when he woke up and found out Richie was gone. It turned out IV painkillers made it really hard to control your facial expressions.

Listening to that voicemail, though, he felt only ninety-five percent certain.

He hit play again.

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Richie did not make it to North Hempstead by the time he promised, though he made it fast enough that the trip could not have been safe or legal. He was breathing heavily when he walked in, frantically scanning the wrong corner of the restaurant, and the hostess eyed him and took a step backwards. The rain had plastered his hair and clothes to his skin. He had mud splashed up his leg and the right arm of his jacket. He looked, objectively, like wet roadkill, and the fact that Eddie's eyes were still drawn to the line of his throat was total bullshit.

Fuck, he might owe Greg Oslacovic an apology.

Instead of dwelling on that distasteful thought, Eddie waved. "Hey! Great voicemail. Just - really stellar."

Richie whipped his head around, then sagged and closed his eyes. “Fuck me,” he said, “please tell me this place serves alcohol.”

“No, really.” Eddie kicked out a chair. “It was very eloquent. You should get up on stage and say words out loud for a living.”

“My old phone is somewhere in the Derry sewer system,” Richie said, dropping into the seat. “I’m not used to the incoming call display on this one yet. Fucking sue me.”

Eddie nodded solemnly. “It’s an iPhone. There’s a big red button that says ‘end call and answer’, and then there’s the whole rest of the screen that does not say that. I can see how that would be intimidating for you.”

“Weird how you looked so fucking angelic when you were unconscious. Yes, fine, I panicked, I thought I was going to hang up on you by accident.”

They both stared at the menus for a second, and ignored the question of why the idea of accidentally hanging up on Eddie was panic-worthy. Eddie had felt a strange flush of confidence when Richie walked in, like he’d just realized he knew every answer on a test he hadn’t even studied for, but that feeling was fading the longer the silence went on.

“What do you recommend?” Richie said after a while. “Are we on lunch or dinner? Does time even have meaning here? What’s good?”

Eddie stared at him, then held up his menu. There were full-color pictures on every page. Onion rings featured prominently.

“Do you honestly think I’ve been here before? It was five minutes from my house and it was the last place Myra would look for me.”

“Yeah, about that,” Richie said.

He’d already told Richie about The Mommy Incident after a half dozen too many drinks their first night in Derry, and while the memory of that revelation still made him cringe, it was also convenient. The incident stood in for so many aspects of the relationship that he didn’t have to explain now. It also meant that he

didn't have to worry about preserving his dignity when describing the afternoon's events, because now that that story was out there, there was nothing he could do or say that would ever make Richie respect him again. It was oddly freeing.

Even so, he started out talking less to Richie than to the plate of cheese fries he had defiantly ordered while waiting but now couldn't bring himself to touch. It was easier to talk if he didn't have to look at Richie's face. At least, it was at first. Then Richie started picking up fries and moving them around making soft zooming noises, and fuck if Eddie was going to reward that kind of behavior, so not looking Richie in the face became a point of pride, and he had to start picking random objects to focus on instead.

"...but I can't just say 'you're controlling and smothering and I need to never see you again if I'm ever going to grow a spine,'" Eddie said to the fern behind Richie's head, "because she'll just ask for examples and then pick them apart until I give in, not to mention it's hard to explain why it took me ten years to figure any of this out. So I just told her I was gay."

Richie, who had moved on to using one large and one small french fry to stage a dramatic reenactment of the dissolution of Eddie's marriage, froze. It was startling enough that Eddie accidentally made eye contact with him. A curl of hair had dried plastered weirdly to his forehead. It was profoundly unfair that Eddie had spent twenty years only distantly aware of any sexual or romantic attraction, and now that he could really, viscerally feel that attraction again he had to feel it towards this asshole.

"Holy shit," Richie said, dropping Freddie and Fryra Kaspbrak. "I mean, this was clearly a hostage situation and you were justified in whatever steps you took to escape, but you seriously lied to your wife about being gay?"

"What?" Eddie said. "No, asshole, I didn't lie to her about being gay, I am gay. I wouldn't lie about that. Wait, are you having some kind of freakout right now?" Because Richie looked like he'd just taken a cartoon anvil to the head. Weirdly, for all the constant low-grade worry that Richie would notice the way Eddie had always trailed along in his wake and draw the obvious conclusions, the idea that

Richie would react badly just to his purely theoretical sexual orientation had never even occurred to him. Jesus, that had been stupid — he couldn't remember Richie saying anything overtly homophobic, but he was still *from fucking Derry*.

"No! No," Richie said, "I'm just mentally rebuilding the foundations of my universe," and Eddie started to breathe again. Richie frowned. "Actually, your marriage is a lot less creepy if it wasn't a sex thing. I just assumed you were regularly driven into an erotic frenzy by the memory of your mom's giant arms in those cotton house dresses."

Eddie gave him two middle fingers, and decided not to mention that he was probably a Kinsey 4, or that the memory of Myra's body curled around his still felt like safety in a way that he would probably always miss, now. He might not have any dignity left, but he also wasn't going to eviscerate himself just for kicks.

"So, as I was fucking saying. First she starts lecturing me on safe sex practices — yeah, I know, don't even make that face — and when I tell her I haven't been cheating on her she decides it means I can't possibly be gay, I must just be confused because so many people assume that about me, which was fucking news to me, by the way — do. not. say it — so I -" *told her about you* "— made up some shit about being secretly in love with Brian from work, and she came over and hugged me and —"

"Wait, hold up, who the fuck is *Brian*," Richie spat, with surprising venom and no audible question mark. A waitress walking towards them made a sharp right turn towards a different table. Where was their food? Wait, had they ordered yet?

"He's ... Brian? He's from work? He's married? He's not relevant to this story." Eddie tried to catch the waitress' eye, then gave up when he realized that she was deliberately avoiding him and that he didn't blame her.

"I hate to break it to you," Richie said, "but you are also married. This isn't Victorian England. People split up all the time. If you really care about this guy, maybe you should. You know. Shoot your shot." Richie looked as though he were swallowing battery acid as he said this, but to be fair, that was probably his reaction to being forced to

express genuine human emotion without a protective layer of irony, and not his reaction to gay cooties.

“I don’t give a shit about Brian,” Eddie said. “Literally all I know about him is that he’s married and likes the Mets, and now that I think about it the Mets thing might be a different Brian. Brian is a prop. Focus.” Eddie snapped his fingers in Richie’s face, then realized that that was an unbelievably rude thing to do that he would never in a million years have done to anyone else, what the fuck was wrong with him, and then he realized he didn’t care and did it a few more times.

Richie didn’t seem to care either, since his entire response was to say “Touché” and eat a cold cheese fry. “So, to recap, you’re not okay lying to your wife about being gay — anymore — you’re just okay lying to her about literally everything else. Doesn’t this seem kind of, I don’t know, elaborate?”

“Please, there was no way she was going to believe I was actually gay if I didn’t give her *something*.”

“I haven’t been in a serious relationship in” — Richie checked his bare wrist — “ever, but I don’t think you’re legally required to convince someone that you’re breaking up with them before you’re allowed to break up with them. I think you can just say ‘I’m breaking up with you’ and leave.”

“Maybe you can, dipshit. If I could do that, do you think I’d be in this position in the first place? My entire plan was based on her breaking up with me.” It was more of a relief to admit than he’d expected. Eddie could get used to having no dignity to lose.

“Ugh, this is so tragic,” Richie said. “But okay, fine. You told her about your fictional sad gay love, she hugged you and forgave you and kicked you out but in a nice way, you get to spend a delightful evening with delightful me — yeah, fuck you too, I see that face — and this story has a happy ending. Right?”

Eddie picked up his napkin, pressed it to his mouth, and silently screamed into it for ten seconds. Then he folded it and put it in his lap. Richie had frozen again, like he thought maybe if he stayed that

way Eddie wouldn't be able to see him.

"No," he said, "No, she did not break up with me."

"*Eddie,*" she had said into his hair, "*Eddie, darling, why do you hurt yourself like this?*" and he had realized that for her, nothing had changed: Eddie pathetically throwing himself at some straight guy and getting rejected — and fuck, that was absolutely what she was picturing now, and she was only going to pat his hand and give him a watery, understanding smile if he tried to correct her — was no different from the time he tried joining the company softball team, or the time he thought he could maybe be the kind of person who enjoyed sushi. Eddie had flown too close to the sun, and now he had fallen, broken, back to earth, and Myra would always be there to pick up the pieces.

Instead of trying to articulate all of that, Eddie unlocked his phone and pulled up his e-mail as he talked. "She said she was sorry I had gotten hurt, but that this was what happened when she couldn't watch out for me because I didn't tell her the truth. And then she said she was going to get me some vitamin-B supplements to help me calm down, and tomorrow we were going to talk about ways to keep me from getting into stressful situations like this again. When I told her I was leaving she wasn't even upset, she just said she understood that I got like this sometimes and we'd talk when I got back. Then she said it was going to rain and she wasn't going let me out the door if I was going to drive, so I set a two-minute alarm on my phone and pretended to call an Uber." Eddie pulled up the latest e-mail on his phone and slid it across the table, then put his head down on his arms so he wouldn't have to look at Richie's face.

"She sent me three websites like this just while I was waiting for you," Eddie said into the table. He could picture Richie squinting down at the screen through his glasses, carefully tapping at the text link. He waited.

"Jesus fucking— is this an escort company?"

"Yep," Eddie said, hitting the 'p' hard. "They have rigorous STD testing policies. It's all part of her plan to make sure I don't do anything 'stupid'." He made finger quotes around 'stupid' without

lifting his head from the table. He hated people who said ‘yep’ and he hated finger quotes, but every other judgment call he’d ever made had been wrong, so statistically he had probably been wrong about those too.

“God,” Richie said softly. “God, Eds, I’m sorry. This is fucking awful.” And great, now Eddie was going to cry. He lifted his head and scrubbed at his face without much success.

“It’s okay. You can laugh. It’s funny. It’s really funny. My life is a fucking joke. I’m not even going to tell you not to use this. Actually, I insist you use this. You’d be an idiot not to. It’s hilarious.”

“The fuck I will,” Richie said. “This is too insane. No one would ever believe it. And even if they did we’d have to have, like, Prozac dispensers at every exit. This is the saddest shit I’ve ever heard.” Fuck, now *Richie* looked like he was going to cry.

Eddie had maybe, vindictively, wanted to see Richie cry just a bit back when he’d been in the hospital feeling abandoned, but now that it was about to happen he was desperate to stop it. “Listen, it’s fine, it’s really not that bad,” Eddie said in a rush. “She’s probably right. I mean, not about the escort service, but about me going back. This was a dumb idea.”

His words were not having the intended calming effect. “Are you fucking kidding me? You are not going back to this psychopath. This is fucking unacceptable.” Shit, Richie’s voice was breaking now.

“I mean, realistically, she’s going to keep calling, and eventually I’m going to have to pick up, and she’ll convince me to come by and talk, and then it’ll pretty much be over.” Eddie tried to keep his voice even and reasonable. “She’s not a bad person. She’s just a problem-solver. It’s not her fault. She really does want what’s best for me.”

“Fuck that,” Richie said. “Just— come with me. Right now. Come with me.”

“What?” Back to Richie’s hotel? To the bathroom to clean himself the up? To a different restaurant that wasn’t an Applebee’s?

“Don’t go back to her. Come with me to California. Let’s just go now. We’ll buy you whatever you need when we get there. I’ll do whatever you want, I’ll put childproof covers on all the outlets and get you a granny chair for the shower. Just— please. Please come with me.”

Holy fuck.

It was obviously misplaced guilt from the hospital talking, plus the shock of experiencing Myra in concentrated doses. There was no way Richie had thought this offer through. That didn’t change the words Richie was saying, or the way his voice had gotten low, or the fact that his eyes were very — blue? Gray? Blue-ish brown? Whatever stupid color they were, they were very that color. Normal people with normal life experiences would probably have defenses against this, but Eddie didn’t, and he took a quick, shocked breath before he could stop himself.

A better person wouldn’t take advantage of an ill-advised, split-second offer like this. Luckily for Eddie, he was not a better person.

“Yeah,” he said, then coughed to clear his throat. “Yeah, okay.”

Behind Richie’s head, the waitress from before gave him a double thumbs-up and mouthed “nice”.

#### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Eddie does not, in fact, owe Greg an apology. Fuck Greg.

## 2. Chapter 2

### Summary for the Chapter:

Richie's dramatic reading series had gotten off to a rocky start when he had to abandon Twilight after three paragraphs ("Surely it was a good way to die, in the place of someone else, someone I loved. Noble, even.") and Left Behind after the title page, but this one looked OK.

### Notes for the Chapter:

I promise it gets funny again. Ish.

Richie Tozier didn't lie to himself. He was, quite possibly, the saddest closet case in Los Angeles county, which would place him high in the running for saddest closet case worldwide, but at least he knew it. Some of the frat bros and finance bros and, once or twice, A-list actors Richie had fucked had insisted they were straight *while he was fucking them*. Some of them, the ones Richie respected more but avoided like the plague forever after, explained that they were waiting for the right time: waiting to graduate, waiting to move, waiting for their careers to hit a certain level, waiting for their dads to die, and hey, maybe they actually were, and that was great for them, but Richie was in this for the long haul.

Richie was not waiting for some distant future moment when it would be safe to stop hiding. Richie was already as close to safe as anyone could expect to get. He was healthy, he was white, and he was rich enough to buy himself out of most problems. He lived in a neighborhood that had gone through six consecutive cycles of gentrification, in a city that blanketed itself with pride flags every June. The bank one block over had an ad that took up an entire exterior wall featuring a well-off-looking gay couple—one black, one Asian—pushing their daughter on a swing.

Richie could wake up one morning in a world of perfect love and equality, and it still would not be safe, because the thing he was afraid of was *already in him*, and had been for longer than he could

remember. It was a seething mass of shame and terror and humiliation that felt almost sentient, and it was *hungry*.

It was a metaphor, obviously. He wasn't delusional; he knew it was all in his head. The problem was that Richie was stuck in there with it.

The trick was keep his head down and never, never let himself forget just what a sad sack of shit he was. He might meet some guy's eye at a hotel bar for a little too long, and that was fine, as long as he couldn't meet his own eyes in the mirrored backsplash afterwards. He could have a nice dinner with his manager and his manager's college buddy and the college buddy's husband, as long as he had to disappear into the bathroom halfway through and do a line or two to get his hands to stop shaking under the table. He could get a blowjob from some anonymous dark-eyed twink as long as he needed four drinks first and threw up at home afterwards. Richie didn't know what would happen if he ever stopped being ashamed, and he didn't think about it, because if he thought about it *it would fucking notice*.

It was pathetic and he was pathetic, but he could keep lying to everyone as long as he didn't lie to himself.

Of course, then he walked into the private dining room at Jade Orient and saw Eddie, and could also suddenly see Eddie in the jawline or hands or, or, or fucking eyebrows of every guy who had ever made his hands sweat for the last twenty-five years, and surprise, Richie: you were lying to yourself the whole time, and for a second he was sure everyone could see it on his face and he thought the shame would swallow him whole.

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Then again, by the time Eddie went into surgery, everybody really did know, and Richie didn't give a shit. Obviously they knew. He had clutched Eddie's unconscious body to his chest and wailed like the world had ended until they agreed to carry Eddie out. Once they made it up to ground level and realized Eddie was somehow still

alive, he had done a repeat performance while Mike called 911, and then he had forced himself onto the ambulance with Eddie, probably by virtue of being so crazy-eyed and covered in snot that the EMTs didn't want to deal with him. When the others got to the hospital five minutes behind, Richie was trying to convince an ER nurse that he needed to follow Eddie into the operating room, and when Ben and Mike gently led him away towards the waiting area, he started sobbing *again*. There were only so many ways to interpret that kind of behavior.

Richie half expected them to sit him down in a far corner and pretend not to know him, because he was a mess, and the whole world could see he was a mess, and he *did not give a shit*. Instead they sat in a semi-circle to either side of him, and carried on a low-voiced conversation around him as though there wasn't a full-grown man weeping in their midst. Nobody tried to talk to him, but they all took turns sitting next to him and rubbing his back while he sobbed, like he was a toddler having a meltdown. It was exactly what he hadn't known he wanted from them, and it just made him cry harder, and he could not possibly give less of a shit about that either.

The next morning, Eddie was out of surgery and his "levels" were good, whatever that meant, so they all followed him to a new room in the other wing of the hospital. Bill went out around 9AM, and came back with a cardboard tray of cups from Dunkin' Donuts and the news that some cops were outside waiting to talk with Mike and Richie. Richie didn't take a cup; he had stopped crying by then, probably from total dehydration, and refused to drink any liquids in case it made him start up again. It was maybe not the best moment to have a conversation with law enforcement about how he had murdered a guy with an axe.

Mike was weirdly unconcerned, though, and to Richie's horror, he turned out to be right. Older Cop (was he even a detective? He had introduced himself as 'Tim') asked Mike what had happened, wrote maybe two lines in a notebook, and asked Richie if he had anything to add. He did not.

Younger Cop ("Ryan Cosetino, it's great to meet you, man, my wife is

not gonna believe this") was less interested in the details of Bowers' death than in telling Mike about his brother-in-law's hardwood refinishing business. He could, according to Ryan, get any stain out of any kind of hardwood, and he had done some work on the town building last year, so Maureen from the permit office already had all the paperwork on file if Mike wanted to hire him to deal with the damage to the library floor. In fact, here was his business card, which Ryan just happened to have on him. Mike thanked him warmly and promised to give the guy a call. This was not like any episode of Law and Order Richie had ever seen.

"So," Richie said haltingly, "should I, you know, stay in town for now? Not leave the state?"

Ryan looked at Just-Tim and shrugged. "I'm not going to say 'don't', but most of the touristy stuff doesn't really kick off until September. To be honest with you, there's just not that much to do around here."

"I meant, in case you guys have any other questions," Richie said. What the fuck.

"Is there anything else you think we should know?" Tim asked. His eyes were starting to look a little weird. Mike clapped Richie on the back, too hard.

"No, no, he's just trying to be helpful. Right, Richie?"

"Right," Richie said. "Sorry." What the fuck.

After Richie signed a paper napkin for Ryan, and they had all shaken hands, and Mike had promised once again to call Ryan's brother-in-law, the cops left. Mike said, "You remember how you said we should let the police deal with it?"

"What the fuck." Richie said.

"Tim's a really sharp guy. He was actually the one who got the arson investigation for my parents' house reopened. He got labeled as, you know, not a team player for that, but he knew something was off about the report and he wouldn't let it go. That's the kind of guy he is."

"*What the fuck,*" Richie said, louder. He felt like he was really exploring all the nuances of the phrase.

"The Derry PD isn't just incompetent. Well, they are pretty incompetent as a group, but it's not just that. There's something about It that doesn't let people notice. We could have told him everything that happened in Niebolt, and all it would have done is give him a migraine."

"...and you couldn't have covered all this before, when I thought I was marching to my interrogation and probable death by electric chair?"

Mike shrugged. "Back in the parking lot you were *very* insistent that the cops could handle everything. Who am I to question your judgment?"

Richie thought up a few dozen bitchy replies to that. Then he said, "I'm sorry I was such an asshole. And I'm sorry we left you to deal with this alone for so long."

"I appreciate that," Mike said sincerely. "I also appreciate your generous offer of your car and all your frequent flyer miles, and I accept."

So, no murder charge, anyway.

Even last night, when Richie was out of his mind with grief, he had known that he would come back to himself eventually, and when he did he would never be able to look any of his friends in the eyes again. He'd collapsed into a useless, needy, pathetic mess and made them all watch, and that's all he would see when he looked at their faces from now on. Instead, he walked in and saw Beverly curled on the chair next to the bed, and just thought: *she looks tired.*

Beverly straightened in her chair. "Are you fugitives from justice? I have eyeliner in my bag if you need me to draw you a fake mustache."

Mike said, "Richie's just had his first sustained encounter with the Derry Effect."

Richie said, "What the *actual fuck*."

"You weren't at a hundred percent for a lot of it," Bev said, "but we had some very strange conversations with the hospital staff last night. It's like they forget you whenever you aren't in their direct line of sight. I'd worry about Eddie's medical care, but..." She let her fingers hover just over the bandage on Eddie's cheek. The surrounding skin had been swollen with infection last night, but now it was smooth and healthy.

Richie thought he understood what she was getting at. Even he knew that that Eddie was looking better than a guy with a punctured lung and half a spleen was supposed to, and he didn't even know what a spleen did. Maybe if an actual doctor noticed how implausible Eddie's recovery was, the universe would correct the mistake and they'd find themselves back in sewers, helplessly watching Eddie bleed to death from wounds inflicted by a giant spider-clown. You know, real life.

Beverly pulled her hand back and leaned forward to grab the last coffee cup from the tray. "Drink this," she said to Richie. "I don't know why I never go to Dunkin's. The monoglycerides in this creamer are the best thing I've ever tasted."

Richie hesitated.

"Hey," she said, a little softer. "Ben and Bill are out raiding all the bathrooms for extra Kleenex. We got you." She pressed the cup into his hand.

Richie took it.

By the second day, they had arrived at a routine where everyone but Richie rotated through Eddie's hospital room in shifts, so that Eddie was never alone but they all had the opportunity to sleep and brush their teeth. Nobody directly commented on the fact that Richie spent the night in Eddie's room sleeping on a line of hospital folding chairs, or on Richie's complete meltdown earlier, or on his sad, creepy, obvious obsession with a guy he hadn't seen for 25 years before last week. That afternoon, though, Bev left to call her lawyer and Mike

and Bill announced, too casually, that they were going with her for moral support. Richie felt the stirrings of unease.

"I'm not going to say that I understand what you're going through," Ben said after the door shut, "because I know that's impossible. But I think I might understand some of it. So if you ever want to talk, I'm here to listen, and probably make you feel better about yourself by comparison." He nodded to himself, and exhaled in a whoosh. "That's everything. We can sit in silence now if you want." Then, seeing that Richie had started to cry again, he said, "Wait, I went to Hannaford's," and replaced the tissue box in Richie's hand with a brand-name box of softer, fluffier tissues that said "Now With Aloe!" on the side. Ben was Richie's favorite.

Beverly was his least favorite, because the next morning she told him he could sleep wherever he wanted but he had to go back to the inn to shower, and that using damp paper towels from the en-suite bathroom did not count.

"I'm not saying you're the only reason he hasn't woken up," she said. "I'm just saying that he might be choosing not to reenter a world that smells like your two-day-old flop sweat."

Fine. It wasn't like the first morning; Eddie was still unconscious and nothing was OK, but Richie was starting to have faith that if he looked away for a minute he wouldn't look back to find Eddie glassy-eyed with a raw, wet hole still in his chest. So he showered and grabbed another change of clothes and his Kindle from his bag before heading back to the hospital.

He paused outside the door where the others were chatting, waiting for that humiliated twist in his gut, but it still wasn't happening. Then he thought, *who gives a shit?* Really, who? He had cried like a little bitch—was, in fact, still crying like a little bitch every thirty minutes or so—and now everyone knew that weird, loud, annoying Richie Tozier wanted to suck Eddie Kaspbrak's dick. So fucking what? Had he really thought that Eddie knowing that about him was his worst nightmare? He would give his left nut—would give everything, really—to know that Eddie was somewhere out there, healthy and happy and alive, thinking of Richie only rarely as that pathetic creep he went to high school with. *Please*, he thought. *Please, I'll do anything.*

On day four, Eddie had started to shift a little every now and then, and sometimes he turned his head away from the window if the sun was coming in. He looked less like he was unconscious and more like he was just sleeping. The nurses who came by had started looking surprised by the contents of his chart, instead of being perpetually surprised there was a patient in G-228 at all. It felt like the rift in the space-time continuum was healing, and Eddie might even wind up on the right side when it closed.

Hope felt dangerous, but fuck it, Richie had spent his entire adult life making himself preemptively miserable. If it hurt more later, then it hurt. It wasn't as though he could jinx it by not being upset enough, firstly because no one would ever look at him and think that he wasn't already upset enough, and secondly because, what, like God was looking down on them going, "well, I was going to let the hero of our story survive, but I see that this random asshole over here still has a tiny scrap of will to live, so never mind"?

Nobody even hinted at leaving, but Mike has a job that he couldn't completely ignore, and Ben, Bill, and Beverly were stuck spending more and more time in that one corner of the hospital parking lot that had cell reception. Richie was left alone with Eddie for hours at a time, which was infinitely better than not being there but was also a shitton of pressure. He was talking too much, or not enough, or maybe he was breathing wrong or not generating enough positive mental energy or something.

Then again, Richie had already tried staying upbeat and telling Eddie much they all missed him and how they were going to celebrate when, not if, he got out of the hospital. He had also tried crying and begging Eddie to wake up, usually alone at 3AM but sometimes mid-morning in front of Bill, two nurses and a janitor, because why the fuck not. Neither approach had worked. So, new plan.

"Hey, Spaghetti," Richie said. He stopped when he heard his voice break, then decided sounding normal was a lost cause and kept talking anyway. "You have the power to make this stop at any time. All you have to do is wake up." He adjusted his glasses.

*"I have final exams to cram for, one essay to finish, and I'm supposed to be working this afternoon, but no—today I have to drive a hundred and*

*sixty-five miles to downtown Seattle in order to meet the enigmatic CEO of Grey Enterprises Holdings Inc."*

Richie's dramatic reading series had gotten off to a rocky start when he had to abandon *Twilight* after three paragraphs ("Surely it was a good way to die, in the place of someone else, someone I loved. Noble, even.") and *Left Behind* after the title page, but this one looked OK.

He expected the other Losers to put up at least a token protest when they arrived to find him halfway through a loving description of Christian Grey's abs, but no one did. Bill even suggested his own second book, which wasn't on the "worst books ever written" GoodReads list Richie was working from, but which clearly should have been. And that evening, Mike slipped in, silently placed a familiar-looking library paperback on the chair next to Richie, and quietly turned to go. Richie glanced at the book, then did a double-take when he recognized the exact battered copy of *Savages of Gor* he had tortured Stan with for two whole weeks in the spring of 1989. After that, Richie obviously had to run after Mike and hug him and then weep into his shoulder for several minutes, while Mike hugged him back and presumably made "eh, what can you do?" faces over Richie's shoulder at anyone who passed by. It had technically ruined his six-hour no-crying streak, but since no one could possibly have responded differently Richie decided it didn't count.

Early on the morning of day five, Richie looked up from a minutely detailed explanation of the Gorean caste system to find Eddie blinking muzzily at him.

Richie stared back. He should be saying something. He should be saying something, like, important and profound. Why the fuck hadn't he planned what he was going to say to Eddie when he woke up? He had never once thought beyond seeing Eddie's eyes open again. Nothing after that had seemed important.

"Richie? How long've...?"

"Five days," Richie said. Fuck, he sounded terrible. He sounded like he'd been crying for exactly five days. He should have been doing voice exercises or something instead.

Eddie closed his eyes. "Fuck, Myra must be pissed. Jus'... couple more minutes, okay?" He turned his head a little and smushed his face into the pillow, and began to snore slightly.

Richie sat, paralyzed, until Bill, Ben and Bev walked in a half hour later.

"Guys," Richie said, "we forgot about Myra."

Ben said, "Fucking *shit*."

The thing was, they really had forgotten about Myra. They had forgotten about her so completely that back in the ER, when someone with a clipboard had asked about Eddie's next of kin, they had spent ten minutes arguing over whether Eddie's aunt in Fredericton was Aunt Wendy or Aunt Winnie, and whether there was any chance she was still alive. Richie remembered thinking, nonsensically, that he had two living parents and three sisters, any one of whom would be fully prepared for a call saying Richie had died under bizarre circumstances. Maybe if he just explained how much simpler it would make the paperwork, the nurses would bring Eddie back out and Richie could go bleed out in surgery instead. When he had looked for Admin Lady, though, she and her clipboard had wandered off while the rest of them were still talking.

Possibly Richie should have noticed something weird about this hospital sooner.

Point was, they might have remembered if someone had asked them again, but nobody had, and now Eddie had been in the hospital for almost a week and nobody had told his wife. From what Richie knew about the woman, she would have found them and had them arrested for kidnapping by now if it weren't for the highly selective incompetence of the Derry County authorities.

Richie recapped his 'conversation' with Eddie, and they relocated to the hallway to argue, because the yelling had made Eddie turn away

and try to cover his head with the pillow. They had almost convinced themselves they were off the hook, since none of them knew Myra's contact information anyway, when Mike arrived and pointed out that they had Eddie's home phone number and address clearly printed on no less than eight luggage tags. Mike was quickly replacing Beverly as Richie's least favorite.

What Richie wanted to say, desperately, was: "Don't call her. We can't let her get her claws back in him. Eddie told me about her, and we have to save him. She'll take him away from us and lock him up and we'll never see him again." But what they would hear wasn't "she'll take him away from us," it was "she'll take him away from me." And that was true too.

Eddie had told Richie a lot of uncomfortable things about his marriage, but unfortunately for Richie none of them were "I don't love my wife" or "I would not want her making medical decisions for me if I were incapacitated." It didn't matter what Richie wanted; it didn't even matter what he thought was best for Eddie. Eddie made his own choice, and he had chosen her. It didn't matter if Richie was pretty sure he was about to throw up again, or if he could hear Sonia Kaspbrak's voice saying *don't play with those boys, Eddie-bear, they'll only get you hurt*, or saying *I know all about you*, but when he pictured that moment she wasn't looking at Bev, she was looking at him, and he knew she could see every sick, dirty thing he wanted to—

"I'm just going to go and. Yeah." Richie said, gesturing vaguely behind himself, and then turned around and didn't stop until he was sitting on a flight back to LA.

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Long before then, before he had even left the hospital parking lot, he had accepted that his act of maturity in recusing himself due to conflict of interest might actually have been an act of fleeing like a fucking coward. It should have been a relief, the return of that old fear, but the fear wasn't the same either; before, it had been so huge he couldn't even make out its edges, and now it was just small and

grubby and squalid. Less H.P. Lovecraft, more that gross part of a Stephen King novel that spends too much time on the bad guy's sadistic sexual fantasies.

It had sent him running anyway. The demon clown was dead, but it turned out Richie could still be a fuckup all on his own.

He had a three-hour layover in Dallas—he could have gotten a nonstop flight if he'd waited another forty minutes, but he cared more about getting away from Derry than about getting home—and he used the time to finally buy a replacement phone at an overpriced kiosk near his gate. When he synced his saved contacts and set up his old number, the screen lit up with a flurry of notifications, then immediately registered an incoming call from Mike. That was not a conversation Richie wanted to have, but if he wanted to know what was happening with Eddie he didn't have a choice. Besides, maybe new IT-free Richie could be just slightly less of a coward than old Richie.

Mike opened with, "This is Mike Hanlon. Do you remember who I am?" and Richie had to sit down with his head in his hands and breathe, because he had been so busy being afraid of the ghost of Sonia Kaspbrak that he hadn't even remembered to be afraid of forgetting them.

After a few seconds, he held the phone back to his face and said, "Yeah, I remember you."

"Do you remember the last two weeks? Because this call is going a lot like the last one."

"Yeah, ha fucking ha, I remember. Thank Christ."

"OK," Mike said. "I have two things I need to tell you. One, Eddie's awake again, and he's fine. No brain damage, as far as we can tell, and he remembers everything. He's still got a hole in his chest, and he's not out of bed yet, but he's sitting up on his own, and he asked about you."

Oh, look, Richie was crying in public again. Oh, look, he still didn't give a shit.

"Two. I am your friend, so I am only going to have this conversation with you once. When we told him you had left, he looked like a kicked puppy. Not a generic kicked puppy. A specific kicked puppy. Are you hearing me?"

"Yeah," Richie said. There were no paper towels in reach, so he wiped his nose on his sleeve.

"Picture a baby Scottie dog. With those big black eyes and that curly fur. It's cowering in a corner. It's shaking. It's making little whining noises."

"Did— did you come up with this yourself?"

"Bev and I worked on it together. Are you picturing it? Can you see its trembling little paws? It's got tears running down its little puppy face. It loves you. It doesn't understand why you're hurting it. Can you see it?"

"I don't think dogs can cry—"

"This one fucking can," Mike said. "Can you see it?"

"Yeah," Richie croaked.

"Great," Mike said. "How was your flight?"

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Omigod you guys.

I've been fandom-dormant for almost a decade now. I started writing this to get the dialogue out of my head so I could go back to focusing on, like, feeding and clothing myself. I didn't expect anyone to find this, let alone read it, let alone have such lovely things to say about it. Every comment on a character point or some throwaway line makes me so happy. Thank you.

Also, I spent a lot of time trying to work in a reference to how Richie is reprising his legendarily

histrionic 1991 high school audition for the role of Maria in West Side Story, except this time he is cursed to do it completely without irony. I couldn't get it to fit. Just know that no one is mentioning it in front of him but everyone is thinking it.

### **3. Chapter 3**

#### **Summary for the Chapter:**

Luckily, Fantasy Eddie was not SAG-affiliated, so reshoots could continue around the clock.

After a fair amount of groveling on Richie's part, Mike gave him an update on The Myra Situation. Myra, to Richie's incandescent rage, was being a lot more gracious than he would have been in her place, which was to say that she was not currently driving up I-93 to get her man back with a loaded shotgun in the passenger seat. She had screamed at everyone a lot about providing Eddie with inferior medical care and taking advantage of Eddie's trusting nature—Richie couldn't help snorting at that one—but then she had decided that Mike was The Only Person She Could Trust With Eddie's Wellbeing In This Difficult Time and agreed to stay in New York as long as she got text updates from him every three hours. Reading between the lines, Mike did not know how he had acquired his new title, and was extremely uncomfortable with it.

Eddie, meanwhile, had talked to her once, mostly to lie about the severity of his original injuries and the name of the hospital he was in, and was now pretending to be more disoriented than he really was to avoid talking to her again. It went a long way towards helping Richie recast his first knee-jerk reaction as 'concerned friend' and not 'Glen Close in *Fatal Attraction*.'

To Richie's combined intense relief and crushing disappointment, Mike did not push him to turn around and get on a plane back to New England. "I'm not going to say that just up and vanishing was the right thing to do, because it wasn't." Mike said. "But— okay, look, we love you and you know we love you and and it sucks that you're not here with us, but Eddie's pretty tired, and you're kind of a lot right now. If you think you need a couple days, take them. Hydrate. Eat something that isn't a Dunkin's egg-and-cheese sandwich. We believe in you."

Richie dutifully picked up a box of Gatorade and a stack of frozen pizzas on the way home from the airport. His plan was to spend the

weekend jerking off and crying, on the theory that he could get it all out of his system at once. Or, okay, enough of it out of his system. He didn't really expect to get his mood swings under control, but he was going to have to get better at faking it if he ever wanted to talk to Eddie (or, for that matter, his agent) again, or if he didn't want to be responsible for Mike's eyes literally rolling out of his head.

On the one hand, he was obviously fucked. He had no plausible deniability left. He could have maybe bluffed his way through his week-long meltdown, but there was no way to bluff your way through going into a fugue state because your best friend woke up from a coma and immediately asked about his wife. So he was going to have to talk to Eddie, and he would probably cry again, and Eddie would be very kind and very uncomfortable and would then make sure to never be in a room with him again without some kind of social buffer. It sucked, and he was probably going to drink a lot about it later.

On the other hand, Eddie was out there somewhere, beautiful and alive and probably bitching nonstop about plaque buildup from his week spent unconscious. More than that: Bill and Bev and Ben were out there too. The world contained people who he loved fiercely and who loved him back. Richie was upset and terrified and probably going to throw up again, but he was also fucking ecstatic.

Was he crying again? Fucking fine, he was crying again, stop the presses. He knew he had problems with emotional regulation. He had already heard that from a therapist, two psychics, and his agent's AA sponsor, and that was just at last year's Christmas party. Hell, that was back before he even had people he cared about.

The world was so much better than it had been two weeks ago. *He* was so much better. He was just starting from a really shitty baseline.

Before he'd even finished stuffing everything into his freezer, his phone dinged with a text from Scott Mullins (actual phone contact name: 'ugh why') that read "want to watch the game 2nite? ;)". He was hit with a wave of embarrassment so strong that he physically curled in on himself. Then he was hit by a wave of euphoria, because

you know what? Scott Mullins was fucking embarrassing, and the fact that he had had hooked up with Scott regularly enough to have a code was even more embarrassing, which meant that his current desire to sink through the floor was completely normal and appropriate.

Richie did not, as a rule, have sex with people twice, and Scott was both a lay pastor for an evangelical church Richie had never bothered to learn the name of and the dullest human being Richie had ever met. He was a white man from Colorado Springs who used the phrase ‘on the DL’ unironically. Richie had never understood why he found Scott’s constant complaints about his hayfever so soothing, or why he kept going back over and over again, like he had a rubber band tied to his dick and Scott was holding the other end. That mystery was now solved: Scott might not look exactly like Eddie, but he did look exactly like a picture of 13-year-old Eddie that had gone through one of those programs they used to age up the lost kids on milk cartons. It was, by any reasonable standard, pathetic.

Richie was not drowning in irrational self-loathing. He was experiencing a moderate amount of perfectly rational self-loathing. He had done a stupid, slightly gross thing, and now he felt stupid and slightly gross about it. It was fucking amazing. In that moment he could have kissed Scott Mullins, except for the part where he was never, ever doing that again.

Also, while 30-year-old Scott was an almost perversely age-appropriate hookup by industry standards, a middle-aged sleazeball searching for a doppelgänger of his rosy-cheeked adolescent first love was literally the first chapter of *Lolita*. Put that way, maybe the fact that Richie had seen grown-up Eddie Kaspbrak and gone from ‘cute guy looks vaguely familiar’ to ‘I will literally set myself on fire to get your attention’ in under a second was the *less* creepy option.

Richie knew a guy who was smart, and brave, and loyal, and kind of a dick, and who had seen some shit in his life and come out the other side still willing to take risks for other people. He was in love with that guy. Really, what did that say about him that was so terrible?

Richie decided to celebrate this new perspective, as well as Eddie’s continued existence in the world. That decision led to his next major

discovery: jerking off was *way better* when every second of it didn't feel like a ritual sacrifice to the gods of internalized homophobia. Jesus, was this what it had felt like in middle school? How had he ever made it to class?

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The weekend did, ultimately, involve a lot of crying. He cried when Bill sent him a picture of Eddie, freshly shaved but still in a hospital gown, squinting peeishly the camera. He cried all three times he spoke to Patty Uris on the phone. He cried when he woke up at 4 AM and had to pull up the Losers' text thread on his phone just to prove that they were real and he hadn't imagined them.

Between crying jags and microwave pizza, though, Richie began the massive undertaking of mentally sifting through all his weird, repressed teenage jerk-off material and recasting the good stuff to feature current Eddie. It was mostly pretty tame, and he could have skipped it entirely and come up with some new material, but he was enjoying himself for once and had no desire to rush. *That Time Eddie Tied Your Shoe For You Because Your Hands Were Full And His Face Was Like Three Inches From Your Dick* was a classic for a reason, as was *That Time Eddie Fell Asleep On You In The Hammock And Got A Half-Chub and You Were Definitely, Absolutely, Probably Not Imagining It*. Plus, putting grown-up Eddie in those shorts gave everything a kind of kinky role-play vibe that appealed to him.

Richie was not in middle school anymore and was not going to come three times in an hour thinking about, like, touching someone's elbow, but he was also discovering the joys of being mildly turned on and not feeling the need to immediately do anything about it. That wasn't something he could do at fourteen, when every brush of skin felt like a five-alarm fire, and it wasn't something he could have done as an adult, when every vaguely sexual thought came with a sucker-punch of terror. But that terror had shrunk enough that he could push it aside for now, and he felt *good*, and who was he hurting?

Okay, he was probably hurting himself (emotionally and to some extent physically, because this lube was definitely expired and not up to the job it was being called on to do). Richie was cool with that. It was a manageable, human-scale kind of hurt.

In the meantime, he was extremely pleased with the dailies coming in. The documentary-style reenactments had gone well, and he was ready to start on the sci-fi classics *Fantasy Eddie Uses The Locker Room Showers Like A Normal Person Instead Of Refusing Every Single Week Because Of Some Totally Fictional Mutant Flip-Flop—Penetrating Strain of Athlete's Foot, What The Fuck* and the conceptually groundbreaking *Fantasy Eddie Also Has a Cast On His Arm and Needs A Hand*. Luckily, Fantasy Eddie was not SAG-affiliated, so reshoots could continue around the clock.

On Monday morning, Bill texted him that Eddie was headed back to New York, and, more ominously, that Bill himself was returning to LA late tonight and would love to meet up tomorrow for lunch and maybe a nice long hike in the hills afterwards. Richie didn't feel ready to reenter the world, but it seemed he'd had all the time he was going to get, so he braced himself for the first (and least important) person he'd been avoiding and hit 'answer' when his agent called.

“...goddamn fucking asshole — what?”

“Tom?”

“Who is this? Did you steal this phone?”

“What do you mean, who is this? You called me.”

“And you picked up. That's fucking suspicious. Is any of the shit Beverly Marsh is saying about you on Twitter true?”

“Absolutely not,” Richie said. “All lies. I never met the woman. I've never heard that name before. I was dead at the time. What did she say?”

“You know what,” Tom said, “I'm going to let you find that out yourself.”

There was a brief pause in which Richie took a bite of pizza. It was not from his freezer, and he had called Upper Crust and had a normal exchange with someone on the phone and another in person with the delivery guy to get it. He felt like he was making real progress.

“So, I'm assuming the talks for the Netflix thing are off,” Richie said.

"Are you fucking kidding me? You have a public mental breakdown — and if you ever pull that shit again, I'll fucking kill you, but it seems to be working out OK this one time — you disappear for two weeks, you *kill a child murderer*, and now America's Sweetheart is either defending your honor or trying to start Twitter beef with you, it's hard to tell. If we play this right I can get you an extra 30%. We'll emphasize the whole emotional trauma angle."

"Tom," Richie said, and then took another bite of pizza for strength. "I am actually kind of traumatized."

"Wait, really?"

"Yeah, really."

"Shit," Tom said. "How traumatized are we talking?"

"A UPS guy came by with a package on Saturday and I hid under the kitchen counter with a knife until he went away."

There was another pause. "Is this a bit?"

"It is not a bit. The knife was a bread knife. I don't know where I got it from. I don't think I even own a bread knife. The Netflix thing is not happening."

"Fuck," Tom said, with feeling. "I was going to get ten percent of that thirty percent."

"I am genuinely sorry for your loss," Richie said.

Tom was weirdly supportive, in his self-involved fast-talking fake—New Yorker way. He didn't berate Richie any more than he already had in his previous 57 voicemails, and he didn't try to talk him into changing his mind beyond keeping the door open for 'future opportunities.' It was just barely possible that Tom was also his friend. Kind of.

Richie repaid him by announcing he would go to the meeting tomorrow in person. Tom was not impressed.

"It's a nice thought, but it's not that big a deal," he said. "It's a video

call with New York. It won't make much of a difference if you come in to the office or just conference in from Silverlake."

"No, I mean I'll go to the meeting in New York," Richie said, frantically scrolling through his messages for Bill's arrival time. 11:30? "I can get on a ten o'clock flight."

"You're going to turn around and fly back to the east coast?" Tom sounded dubious.

"Sure," Richie said. "Better to have conversations like this in person, right? Make an effort. Show that you value the relationship and all that jazz, and you didn't mean to blow him off like a fucking lunatic. I mean, blow them off." He tapped out *sorry out of town, rain check?* to Bill.

"Don't get me wrong," Tom said, "ordinarily I would be thrilled to hear you talking that way, but I have to ask: if I let you do this, are you going to stab Rob Seberg with a bread knife?"

Maybe Richie should have downplayed the bread knife incident. "That was 48 hours ago. I've done a lot of psychological healing since then."

"Okay," Tom said, and sighed heavily. "Just— please. Act sane."

"I will do my very best," Richie promised.

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As a thirteen-year-old, Richie sometimes wished he could forget Eddie Kaspbrak. No one in human history could possibly have suffered the agony of heartbreak as he did, and if Eddie ever found out he would obviously have to move to — to fucking Aroostook County or some shit and become a hermit so he would never have to speak to him again. If only he could escape the stinging pains of unrequited blah blah fucking blah.

At forty, Richie knew how rare friends like Eddie were, and he knew having Eddie in his life was infinitely better than not having Eddie in his life. Richie had embraced the friendzone, and he was applying for permanent residency. He was willing to have as many painfully

awkward conversations in well-lit public places as he had to to get there, if Eddie was willing to let him try.

So, he had a plan. He had gotten the meeting over with first, so that when he called Eddie he wouldn't have any scheduling constraints. (Note to self: it turned out acting like a professional adult was a lot easier when talking to a roomful of executives was the *least* important thing that would happen that day.) He would keep things as low-pressure as possible, and he would follow Eddie's lead. If Eddie didn't bring it up, he wouldn't. If Eddie did, he would explain that he understood that his feelings were his own responsibility, and that if Eddie was interested in maintaining their friendship he would do his utmost to keep shit from getting weird again. He had read a lot of online advice columns and he had a speech (well, an outline) that Bev had proofread and pronounced "not terrible."

The worst that could happen was Eddie saying he was busy and making some transparently false promise to keep in touch, but Richie had a plan for that too: he would get back on the next flight to LA and empty the beverage cart immediately.

Well, OK, the actual worst thing that could happen was Eddie saying, "Why are you calling me? We aren't friends. We don't know each other. We spent sixteen hours together, total, and they all sucked. Why would I care what you do?" But Richie was getting better at recognizing when his brain was offering him plausible scenarios and when it was just being an asshole.

He was prepared. He could do this.

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He was absolutely not prepared. None of Richie's contingency plans had included Myra being a fucking alien with no human emotions, though he thought he could be forgiven for that. He had also completely blown it at not making things weird, and his brain was desperately screaming *dial it back, dial it back, fucking mayday* when Eddie said:

"Yeah. Okay."

Richie blinked. "Okay?"

"Yes, okay. Okay, I'll go to California with you. You offered, if you changed your mind just say so, you don't have to act like I'm crazy for answering a question *you fucking asked me*—"

"No!" Richie said. "I mean, yes. No. I'm not changing my mind, I'm just surprised. I was expecting more resistance."

At that moment, Eddie's phone vibrated in Richie's hand, and the name 'Myra' appeared on the display. Richie stared at it in horror, then dropped the phone with enough force to send it skidding across the table. It slid to a stop against a napkin dispenser and sat, buzzing malevolently, until it finally chirped a 'missed call' tone and quieted.

"So," Richie said, "can I buy us some tickets?"

Eddie covered his face with his hands. "Please."

Richie took 40 minutes to find them a flight, but that was mostly because he had to find the aircraft specs for each one and make sure they had business class seats that reclined to a full 180 degrees. Eddie alternated between eating bits of chocolate cake—the waitress had brought them a slice with two forks and left before Richie could tell her she had the wrong table—and looking at Richie like he was the alien instead of Myra.

Richie lasted through two thirds of the cake before he broke. "What? Do I have something on my face?"

"Yes," Eddie said. "Always. But mostly I'm not used to anyone but Myra being this concerned about my lumbar vertebrae. It's weirding me out."

"You just got stabbed through the chest. I don't want to be responsible for killing you by taking you on a flight that gives you, I don't know, spinal clots. Bill will insist on forgiving me, and it'll be super awkward. Do you need to have your feet elevated?"

Eddie slowly pulled back from the table, looked down at his own feet on the floor, and looked back up at Richie. "I have a chest wound," he said. "Why the fuck would I need to keep my feet elevated?"

Richie made an elaborate series of gestures to convey the concept

“We killed an evil space clown and then magic forces brought you back from the dead, why would I assume anything about anything?” without saying the words “magic forces” or “evil space clown” out loud. Eddie gave him a look conveying the concept that saying ‘evil space clown’ out loud would have been less embarrassing.

“Okay, fine, Delta it is,” Richie said, and hit SELECT FLIGHT. “Is two hours from now OK?”

“Sure,” Eddie said. “Didn’t you have stuff to do, though? You said you were going to be in town for a couple days. What about your return flight?”

“It’s a flex fare,” Richie said, instead of *I didn’t buy a return ticket; I was going to wait right here until you either talked to me or told me to fuck off.* “I had a meeting this afternoon and I thought I’d stay a few days after, try and see some people, but now I really just want to get home.” All technically true.

Before they left, Eddie announced he was headed outside to make “a quick call in to work,” and Richie tried to pretend like he hadn’t entirely forgotten that Eddie had a job. He stayed to sign the check, complete with a \$100 tip for the waitress who had let them hog the table for two hours after ordering a single plate of cheese fries, and slid into the passenger seat of the Acura while Eddie was mid-sentence.

“—not planning to come back, no. I’ll be telecommuting from Los Angeles.” Pause.

“That’s unfortunate. If only we’d hired someone entry-level to take over those tasks, like I’ve been suggesting for the past five years.” Another pause.

“Well, Bob, I’m sorry you feel that way. I’ll be in Los Angeles. If that doesn’t work for the company, I’ll be happy to submit my resignation. Otherwise, you’re welcome to send a courier out to me. In Los Angeles. Where I will be.” Eddie sounded almost robotically calm, but the corner of his mouth was quirking up.

“You know, Bob, maybe if you hadn’t jerked Sandra around exactly

like I warned you not to, she wouldn't have quit, and I wouldn't be the only person left who understood the system. But you did, and she did, and here we are. Please let the west coast office know about the new arrangement."

There was definitely someone yelling on the other end of the phone, and that quirk of Eddie's mouth was fucking evil. Richie reminded himself that just because Eddie was willing to graciously ignore Richie's big dumb crush did not mean Richie was allowed to try to blow him in an Applebee's parking lot.

"Oh, look," Eddie said, deadpan. "We're going into a tunnel." He hit a button on the headset and turned to Richie, eyes glinting in triumph. "Sorry about that. I just needed to wrap some things up."

Had Eddie been showing off for him? Jesus, that was mean. Richie shifted in the passenger seat and hoped the sodium lights washed out the flush on his face.

On the way to the airport, they got into a physical altercation over the car radio, managed to get it permanently stuck on an NPR station doing a retrospective on 20th century atonal composers, and missed the exit to the rental office twice in a row because they were too busy arguing about the correct moment to engage a turn signal. While going through security, Richie realized his suitcase was still at the hotel, and Eddie was flagged by a TSA agent who refused to believe anyone could have a non-sinister reason for that many different specialty hand sanitizers. Eddie told the TSA agent that working near baggage X-rays was going to give her cancer, then got into an argument with her supervisor about how radiation shielding worked. They were the last two people onto the plane. It was maybe the best day of Richie's adult life.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Alternate title for this chapter: "Maybe the real clown murder was the prescription antidepressants we took along the way."

Why did I open this story and then do a two-chapter flashback? No idea! Was it supposed to take 12k

words to get to this point? Absolutely not! Will I go back and cut a lot of this shit out? Probably!

Final note: the NPR station they got stuck on was playing Boulez' Piano Sonata No. 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSwFQl7UI9Y>. It's horrific.

ETA 12/08: I got completely swamped around Thanksgiving and resurfaced to find some truly heartwarming comments here. Thank you.

And from some of these comments, I learned that someone has turned some of the first chapter into comic panels? And the art is fucking amazing? The lettering alone is *so cool*. Their twitter is at [https://twitter.com/rah\\_ciach](https://twitter.com/rah_ciach), with several comic panels [here](#), and I highly recommend checking out both their IT fanart and their artwork in general, because it's stunning.

## **4. Chapter 4**

### **Summary for the Chapter:**

In which they make it to California, and Eddie's experiences are not universal.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

The next chapter is taking \*ahem\* longer than expected, so here's a transitional interlude to prove that I'm not dead.

Thank you so much to everyone who has left comments so far. I'm delighted that people are still enjoying this.

In the departure lounge, Richie spent fifteen minutes on the phone with his cleaning service: two minutes setting up an emergency appointment, and the remaining thirteen doing an impromptu standup set on the many neuroses of Eddie Kaspbrak, and what an asshole Eddie was going to be if he found even a speck of dust in Richie's house. The routine was clearly for Eddie's benefit, because Richie kept looking over at him to make sure he was listening and saying increasingly ridiculous things if he thought Eddie's attention was wandering. Eddie was pretty sure he had heard a dial tone from the other end of the phone halfway through. It was stunningly obnoxious. Eddie glared daggers and desperately hoped that Richie couldn't tell how much he liked it.

Eddie had met intensely charming people: smart, funny, interesting people who made you feel like you were smart and funny and interesting when you were around them. Richie did none of that. What he did was stranger and far more addictive. He had this knack of making you feel like your opinion was the only one he cared about, even if he thought that opinion was insane. When Richie focused on you, it was like you were the only person in the world who mattered. It was a heady drug, and once you got a taste of it you

would never stop wanting more, even if ‘more’ came in the form of Richie calling you a sentient seatbelt alarm to your face while carrying on a pretend phone conversation with someone who’d already hung up. Eddie suspected the only reason Richie hadn’t casually taken over the world yet was that he didn’t know he had this power over people, and it was Eddie’s sacred duty to keep him from finding out, because God-Emperor Richie Tozier would be a fucking nightmare.

The call probably hadn’t started off fake, though, so when they arrived Eddie was already prepared for Richie’s place to be spotless. He wasn’t prepared for it to be so... beige. When he had tried to picture what Richie would do with Hollywood money, he had come down somewhere between ‘sleek leather-and-chrome penthouse’ and ‘one-man frat.’ This place looked like a hotel, except Eddie had once spent three weeks at a Marriott Residence Inn and Suites in Omaha that took more aesthetic risks. There were actual landscape photographs on the walls. The effect reminded him of staged open houses he’d visited with Myra, where the real estate agent had gone through in advance and removed any traces of personality or color and replaced them with an alarming number of throw pillows.

Come to think of it, this living room had a shit-ton of throw pillows, and he recognized those wispy sheer tension-rod curtains realtors put up instead of blinds to make the room seem more open while hiding the neighbors’ trash cans from view. The only things in the room that made sense were a bookcase filled with DVDs and scuffed paperbacks, and a few loose items the cleaning service had stacked neatly at the end of the couch: a garish polar-fleece blanket covered in Red Sox logos, a dented coffee thermos, and a couple of cushions that had clearly taken more abuse than the others. It didn’t look like Richie had bought the place and furnished it; it looked like Richie had walked into an ongoing open house, built a pillow fort, and refused to leave until everyone else gave up and wandered off.

“Yeah, that’s pretty much what happened,” Richie said, kicking Eddie’s second suitcase through the door and locking it behind him. “I was in a bad roommate situation—”

“When was this?”

"It's an expensive city, okay? Anyway, I was in these dumb soda commercials and after that I had, you know, money, but my old apartment had bedbugs and I had to leave all my stuff, so I paid an extra couple grand for them to just hand the house over and leave the furniture and shit." Richie paused, misreading the horror on Eddie's face. "I don't have bedbugs. The whole point of moving was to not have bedbugs. I did not lure you here so I could save myself by sacrificing you to the bedbugs instead. Stop looking at me like that."

"I believe you, but I'm going to need to know more about your ongoing bedbug prevention measures," Eddie said. He didn't say, *You've been living like a squatter in your own home for nine and a half years?*, not because it would have been insensitive, but because it would have revealed that he knew the exact airdate of Richie's first soda commercial.

Richie's house did not have any ongoing bedbug prevention measures. It also did not have a non-slip mat in either bathroom, or grab rails in the shower (understandable, but Eddie was still getting dizzy spells and really needed them), or a working bathroom exhaust fan. ("What do those fans even do, anyway? Just light a match," Richie said, while Eddie buried his face in his hands and moaned softly.) But the house did have a ground-floor guest room with, they were both surprised to learn, a pretty decent mattress, and it had Richie walking around in a soft grey t-shirt, occasionally backlit by the setting California sun.

Eddie was no longer worried that he was thinking with his dick. If thinking with his dick gave him the motivation he needed to get through this next week, he was going to objectify the shit out of Richie Tozier. Maybe once Richie was done with the suitcases Eddie could find more heavy things for him to lift.

Eddie had honestly intended to sit down with Richie that night and have a serious, adult conversation about how grateful he was for Richie's help and what he could do to avoid imposing on Richie's hospitality too much or interfering with his daily routines. Instead, sitting down for a minute turned into arguing about dinner, which turned into arguing about whether eating after 8PM would mess up your circadian rhythms, which turned into Richie claiming that Viagra cured jet-lag in hamsters.

"Bullshit," Eddie said.

"Eds, I swear to God, it's science. There was an article—"

"In what, *Mad Magazine*?"

"No, it was in *National Geographic* or some shit—"

"Ah, that titan of science reporting, *National Geographic* or *Some Shit*—"

"I was at the dentist's office, okay, it was one of those dentist office magazines, but I'm telling you—"

Richie was obviously talking out his ass, and to prove it Eddie dug his phone out of his pocket and spent 30 seconds waiting for Google to load before remembering he had to switch airplane mode off.

His phone went berserk.

"Any of that from work?" Richie asked, carefully neutral.

"No," Eddie said. He was trying to read the backlog of text alerts as they popped up, but new messages replaced them too fast for him to do more than skim. "She, ah, fuck, she called in to work to check on some medical leave paperwork and she found out I'd put in a transfer request. And... kind of found out where I was going, although I don't think she knows-- okay, yeah, she knows I'm in California, but not where in California." He cleared his throat. "The good news is that she's taking it seriously now."

"Is there a reason you can't just block her number?" Richie said.

"I can't just – aaagh. Look, I'm her emergency contact. I'm on her company's health insurance. We own a house together. One of these—" he waved the phone "-might be important, so I'm stuck reading all of them." While he was speaking, another text came in: *Please talk to me. This isn't like you.*

"Isn't it, like, 1AM in New York right now?" Richie asked.

"Closer to two," Eddie said, miserably. His phone dinged again.

*Eddie, please call me. I'm worried. Fuck.*

To add insult to injury, Richie was right about hamster Viagra.